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ABSTRACT

The process of writing a research paper must be broken into manageable units while at the same time retaining the recursive characteristic of the writing process. One approach does this by means of a series of assignments that also allow students to accumulate and practice the skills needed to write the final paper. These assignments are (1) directed brainstorming, to choose a topic; (2) the thesis question, to direct research; (3) a retrospective essay, to assimilate information and evaluate progress; (4) a reading report, to summarize, evaluate, and acknowledge source materials; and (5) a research essay, to try out organizational skills on a smaller body of information. The final step for the students is to write the research paper. The results of using this method for approximately three years are that better papers are produced and more positive feedback from students is received. The series of assignments is meant to give a forward direction to such meandering and mistakes, and to recognize their legitimacy in arriving at a well-organized, well-written research paper. (DF)

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MEANDERING ROADWAYS VS. SUPERHIGHWAYS: AN APPROACH TO TEACHING THE RESEARCH PAPER

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I like teaching the research paper, but I am quite aware that many of my colleagues see it as more burden than pleasure. Why? One reason may be that teachers, like students, look to the end product and feel overwhelmed by the task of producing it. The obvious answer is to break the large task into several smaller ones to make the project more manageable, and virtually every text on writing a research paper is set up to do this. There is a chapter on finding a topic, one on finding information on the subject, another on taking notes, one on acknowledging sources, and others on organizing the information. This pattern is fine as far as it goes; however, while it is true that each of these tasks must be completed--in approximately that order--writing a research paper involves more than completing a linear set of tasks that lead on a straight road to a finished product.

Much of the current research in composition stresses process over product, emphasizing the importance of showing students how to brainstorm; how to write freely to get ideas down on paper; how to review, rearrange, rework, add to, and delete from in order to organize those ideas; and then how to edit and polish. Therefore, we must break the process of writing the research paper into manageable units and at the same time retain the recursiveness characteristic of and essential to the process of writing.

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An approach I use does this by means of a series of assignments that also allow students to accumulate and practice the skills needed to write the final paper. While I will mention all the assignments in the series, I will discuss five in greater detail:

1. "Directed brainstorming" to choose a topic
2. The thesis question to direct research
3. A "retrospective essay" to assimilate information and evaluate progress
4. A "reading report" to summarize, evaluate, and acknowledge source material
5. A research essay to try out organizational skills on a smaller body of information.

I will also offer a rationale for each of these assignments and tell specifically what the students are asked to do.

Ideally, students should be able to choose their own topics based on subjects of interest and importance to them. They should not be limited by our notions of what is important or by the prevailing idea that "sources" means primarily reading material from a library. If, however, part of the reason for including the research paper in the curriculum is to teach library skills, we want them to have topics that will enable them to use the libraries available. If we plan to check any sources, we will probably prefer students' using the library close at hand--namely the college library. Sometimes this means limited resources. The Southern Tech library, for example, is primarily a technical library. We have plenty of material for topics of current technical interest but little in the way of historical or literary materials. Other

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considerations in the choosing of topics are that in the real world, college students do use fraternity files and teachers may blanch at the four hundredth paper on solar energy. My point is that if we want to direct students to available sources, to prevent cheating, and to spread the research material around, we often have to assign topics. Since that is often a sure way to elicit the complaint, "I just can't get into this topic," allowing some leeway makes assigned topics more palatable to the students. Rather than having to come up with a list of topics each quarter from which the students choose, I use "directed brainstorming."

When I give the students a handout describing the research paper and listing the specific requirements, I put a letter at the top of each one. This letter represents the volume of several encyclopedias the students must go through, browsing and reading, looking for a topic that appeals to them. In the past I noticed that many students chose a topic and then wanted to go to the encyclopedia as a major source of information. Since an encyclopedia is a great source of background information, I have them go there first, before they settle on a topic. So that they are not too limited, I also allow them to pursue spinoff interests. In other words, a student with the letter C might read about California and find that the San Andreas fault is the site of many earthquakes. That student then might be interested in earthquakes and go to the E volume(s) to find out more about them. "Earthquakes" then becomes the topic. The student still has not settled on a focus for the paper, but he or she now has a subject. This technique recognizes that a topic does not just appear fullblown, and it uses to some extent the technique of brainstorming,

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that is, letting one idea come from another idea and lead to yet another one.

Once the students have several possibilities for topics, they write an informal summary of their background reading and tell me how they arrived at their topic from the assigned letter. For some the latter is a simple straight line--A to Africa to African famine. For others, the path has a few twists and turns--A to astronaut to space exploration to contributions of the space program in medicine. I want the students to see how they got their topic, the path the ideas followed and the way the topic broadened or narrowed or changed altogether. I also want them to summarize their reading from memory. They will be surprised at what they remember; they will not be able to copy; and they will see that some reading they did will not be included in the final product--and that that is all right. In other words, they will see how they moved from brainstorming to selecting.

After the students have topics, the next step is to narrow the field and give direction to the research. To do this, I have the students write out a thesis question. Many books advocate beginning with a thesis statement, but if a student picks one point of view at this juncture, he is less likely to be objective in his research. I set three conditions for this thesis question: it cannot be answered yes or no (Is the world's supply of natural gas being depleted at current consumption rates?); the answer cannot be merely opinion (Which is more interesting, science fiction or mysteries?); and the question cannot be answered by going to just one source of information (What were the terms of the treaty ending the Civil War?). I encourage questions beginning with "what," "why," and

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"how": What are the reasons for the defection of dancers from the Soviet Union? Why has the divorce rate in the United States risen in the last ten years? How has space exploration benefited medicine? I try to show the students how such questions will eventually lead to a thesis statement that provides an organization for the whole paper: "What are the motives for the defection of dancers from the Soviet Union?" may lead to "The three primary motives of dancers who defect from the Soviet Union are personal freedom, artistic freedom, and financial rewards."

When the students have settled on their thesis questions, they are ready to make a list of potential sources, their working bibliographies. So that they will not be inundated with mechanics at the end of the quarter, I teach bibliographic form here, and they must make their lists using correct form.

After the working bibliography, I discuss notetaking. I tell them about the traditional system of notecards, but I also mention other possibilities and tell them that if they have a "system" that they can explain to me, they may use that. To insist on notecards seems narrowminded when a colleague did quite well in graduate school never using that system. I do insist, however, that their system incorporate a means of identifying the source and the page number, information they will need for documentation later.

Research has shown that at various points in the writing process, writers look back to assess what they have said or learned and to determine where they need to go. Doing this, they see that some paths taken were interesting but lead nowhere, just as some passages written were brilliant but just don't work in a particular

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context and must be eliminated. Therefore, after some time to gather information, I ask the students to write a "retrospective essay." In this essay, the students discuss what they knew about their subjects when they started gathering information and what they know about their topics now. In the essay, they must also assess what information will be useful and what research was merely sidetracking. Finally, they must determine what they still need to find out. So they give themselves some direction for their future research. The essay is often a great confidence builder. Both the students and I are often surprised at how much they have found out in a short time. This first attempt at synthesizing the research has an additional benefit as well. Since the students do not have their source material or their notes at hand when they write the essay, they see that they can explain what they have learned without extensive quoting, that they can depend on their own verbal ability.

The next assignment is more formal. The "reading report" is a summary and evaluation of one article or one chapter in a book they have found useful. Between the preceding assignment and this one, I have covered how to quote and paraphrase and how to acknowledge sources. Within the reading report, they must do all three. The title of the report is the full bibliographical information, so they get practice there, too. Once again, the students are performing several research paper skills in a small piece of writing. Using only one source, they can concentrate on mechanics such as skillful paraphrasing, proper lead-ins and correct punctuation for quotations, and correct form for internal documentation. Such assignments are checks both for the students and for the teacher. If something is

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amiss, it can be corrected here rather than on the final paper when the student no longer has an opportunity to try again to do it right.

The last assignment before the final paper is the research essay. The research essay offers students a chance to try out all their new skills together but in a manageable dose. At this point I have asked the students to write a sentence outline. I still hold to this tradition of outlining and insist on complete sentences for the simple reason that it seems to work. The students must organize their information, decide what order to present their facts, and begin to write in whole thoughts by having to write sentences. For the research essay, they choose one part of their outline and the topic sentence for that part becomes the thesis sentence for the research essay. For example, if the entire paper is on famine in Africa, the thesis statement might be "The three primary causes of the current famine in Africa are the weather of the last two years, tribal feuds, and poor farming methods." The major parts of the outline then would be weather, tribal strife, and poor technology in agriculture. For the research essay, a possible thesis statement would be "One cause of the famine in Africa is the weather of the past two years." Then the middle paragraphs would discuss rainfall rates, temperature fluctuations, etc.

The research essay requires its own introductory and concluding paragraphs, but the middle of the essay can usually be inserted into the research paper with very few changes. Thus the students now have a big chunk of the final paper done--they have part of the information "down on paper." For many of them, that is the hardest step. The essay also provides one last opportunity for evaluation

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before the final product. In this essay I ask them to quote or paraphrase as appropriate, acknowledge their sources, and include a list of references.

The final step for the students is to write the research paper. By that time they are familiar with the nuts and bolts skills like documenting sources, they have culled their notes for useful and useless information, and they have written a portion of the paper. This system has helped them to concentrate on the process of writing the paper rather than the end product.

What are the results of using this method for approximately three years? I read better papers; and I get much positive feedback from the students, comments like "I found the step-by-step process of doing the term paper very helpful. I'd never done one before and was terrified at just getting started."

It would be nice if the first day of the term we could rev up our engines, enter the Research Expressway, and zoom directly to Completed Paper. But most of us want to take sidetrips, need rest stops, make a wrong turn or two, pause to take a look at the map, and have to retrace a few miles. This series of assignments is meant to give a forward direction to such meanderings and mistakes as well as recognize their legitimacy and often necessity in arriving at the destination, a well-organized, well-written research paper.

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